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Southcom Game

By Robert A. Manning

WASHINGTON — President Reagan is eager, in this campaign season, to convince American voters that he has turned over a new, more moderate and conciliatory leaf in his policy toward Central America. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, the Administration's tactical maneuvering makes little difference, for our Central America policy has taken on a bureaucratic momentum of its own. Unless that momemtum is checked, it will make the debate over our policy in the region largely academic and may in the end lead to direct military involvement.

Congressional skepticism about the Administration's policy was sharply reduced this summer by election results in El Salvador and Guatemala. Yet recent disclosures that the Pentagon is drawing up contingency plans for United States air strikes against Salvadoran guerrillas says more about our policy in Central America than any images of moderation.

The hard truth is that the institutions most involved in implementing United States policy are the Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency, while the role of the State Department has steadily shrunk as the Administration has turned away from serious diplomacy in the region. This is a dramatic turnaround from the Carter years, when military and economic aid to Central America was minuscule and the Pentagon was but a minor actor in the shaping of policy.

Today, the State Department has been largely cut out of the conduct of policy toward Central America. Instead, the main players are the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Fred C. Iklé, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Inter-American Affairs, Nestor D. Sanchez, the C.I.A., and Gen. Paul E. Gorman, chief of Southern Command, or Southcom, headquartered in Panama.

How has this happened? One of the main causes is the skyrocketing increase in United States military aid to the region.

In the past three years, the C.I.A. has spent at least $75 million in covert support for the contras, or counter-revolutionaries, seeking to oust the Sandinista regime. The Administration's request for $243 million in military aid for El Salvador for fiscal 1984 is a 4,000 percent increase over the $5.9 million granted to that country in fiscal 1980. Similarly, its request for military aid to Honduras for 1985 amounts to 1,000 percent more than that country received in all four years of the Carter Administration. Even in Costa Rica, which has only a police force and no army, military aid has jumped from $35,000 during the last year of the Carter Administration to the $10 million requested for fiscal 1985.

Beyond these figures is the burgeoning United States military and paramilitary involvement in the region. Southcom, until recently viewed in the Pentagon as a sleepy backwater, has become the hub of the kind of controversial activity known in the Pentagon as "low-intensity conflict" — in effect, undeclared war. Military exercises in Honduras have meant a constant military presence in the region and allowed us to build some half dozen air bases, radar stations, storage bunkers and base camps. These facilities, which would provide a system of forward bases if the United States intervened directly, have already been used to fly reconnaissance for Salvadoran forces and provide support for the contras.

The growing mission in Central America has also seen the expansion of elite special forces in each branch of the military. A number of the new special forces, such as the Army's Intelligence Support Activity, were formed to combat terrorism, but they have put to other uses and many now operate closely with the C.I.A. in its varied covert operations in Central America. As was the case in Vietnam, this incremental expansion of paramilitary involvement has its own dangerous momentum.

In Central American, as in Vietnam, military aid and paramilitary operations can for a time help us avoid direct intervention. The danger, of course, is that such indirect involvement will eventually lead to the commitment of troops. Meanwhile, a military approach does nothing to address the root causes of the Central American crisis, and in the end it can only heighten the conflict. It promises to further polarize the region and lead eventually to the very radical victories Mr. Reagan seeks to prevent.

It took a hopelessly deteriorating situation on the ground and widespread popular opposition to force the executive branch to end the war in Vietnam. Similiarly, in Central America, Congress cannot hope to limit our involvement by "nickle and diming" here and there in response to the Administration's requests for military aid. If we really want to alter course, we must do something to reverse the building military momentum.

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